Fiscal Policy

INTRODUCTION

Definition and Purpose of Fiscal Policy

Fiscal policy is the combined practices of government with respect to revenues, expenditures, and debt management. Fiscal planning, generally done within the context of the Public Services Program (PSP)/Operating Budget and the Capital Improvements Program (CIP)/Capital Budget, reflects and helps shape fiscal policy.

The budget process not only reflects those fiscal policies currently in force, but is itself a major vehicle for determining and implementing such policies. The fiscal policy statements presented on the following pages are not static. They evolve as the economy and fiscal environment change and as the County population and requirements for government programs and services change.

The purposes of fiscal policy for the PSP/Operating Budget are:

- **Fiscal Planning for Public Expenditures and Revenues.** Fiscal policy provides guidance for good public practice in the planning of expenditures, revenues, and funding arrangements for public services. It provides a framework within which budget, tax, and fee decisions should be made. Fiscal policy provides guidance toward a balance between program expenditure requirements and available sources of revenue to fund them. Fiscal planning considers long-term trends and projections in addition to annual budget planning.
- **Setting Priorities Among Programs.** Clearly defined and quantified fiscal limits encourage setting priorities by government managers and elected officials, thus helping to ensure that the most important programs receive relatively more funding.
- **Assuring Fiscal Controls.** Fiscal policies relating to County procurement of goods and services, to payment of salaries and benefits, to debt service, and to other expenditures are all essential to maintaining control of government costs over time.

Organization of This Section

Following are the major fiscal policies currently applied to the PSP/Operating Budget and financial management of Montgomery County (see the Recommended CIP for policies that relate more directly to the CIP). Numerous other fiscal policies that relate to particular programs or issues are not included here but are believed to be consistent with the guiding principles expressed below.

The presentation of fiscal policies is in the following order:

- Policies for fiscal control
- Policies for expenditures and allocation of costs
- Policies for debt management
- Policies for governmental management
- Policies for revenues and program funding
- Fiscal policy for user fees and charges
- Framework for fiscal policy

FISCAL CONTROL POLICIES

Balanced Budget

It is the fiscal policy of Montgomery County to balance the budget. No deficit may be planned or incurred.

Budgetary Control

The County will exercise budgetary control (maximum spending authority) over Montgomery County government, through County Council approval of appropriation authority within each department and special fund in three categories: Personnel Costs, Operating Expenses, and Capital Outlay; over the Montgomery County Public Schools and Montgomery College, through appropriations in categories set forth by the State; over the County's portion of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) activities, through approval of work programs and budgets; and over the Washington Suburban Transit Commission through appropriation of an operating contribution.

Budgetary control over the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) is exercised following joint review with Prince George's County, through approval of Operating and Capital Budgets, with recommended changes in sewer usage charges and rates for water consumption.

Budgetary control over the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) and the Montgomery County Revenue Authority is limited to approval of their capital improvements programs and to appropriation of an operating contribution to the Housing Opportunities Commission.

Financial Management

The County will manage and account for its Operating and Capital Budgets in accordance with Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) as set forth by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB).

Basis of Budgeting/Accounting Method

The County's basis of accounting used in the preparation and presentation of its Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR) is consistent with Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) for governments.

The County maintains its accounting records for tax supported budgets (the General Fund, special revenue funds, and Capital Projects fund supported by general tax revenues) and permanent funds on a modified accrual basis, with revenues recorded when available and measurable, and expenditures recorded when the services or goods are received and the liabilities are incurred. Accounting records for proprietary funds and fiduciary funds, including private-purpose trust funds, are maintained on the accrual basis, with all revenues recorded when earned and expenses recorded at the time liabilities are incurred, without regard to receipt or payment of cash.

The County's basis of budgeting for tax supported and proprietary and trust fund budgets is consistent with the existing accounting principles except as noted below.

- The County does not legally adopt budgets for trust funds;
- The County legally adopts the budgets for all Enterprise funds but does not legally adopt the budgets of Internal Service funds, with the exception of the Liability and Property Coverage Self Insurance fund and the Employee Health Benefits Self Insurance fund;
- Debt service payments and capital outlay are included in the operating budgets of proprietary funds;
- Proprietary fund budgets do not include depreciation and amortization, and bad debts;
- The County budgets certain capital lease payments in tax supported funds; however, these lease costs are reclassified to the Debt Service fund for accounting purposes;
- The County budgets cost and revenues for Commercial Paper Bond Anticipation Notes (BANs) retired through the issuance of General Obligation bonds; and
- Certain amounts, such as those relating to the purchase of new fleet vehicles and certain inter-fund services such as permitting and solid waste services, are budgeted as fund expenditures but are reclassified to inter-fund transfers for accounting purposes.

Internal Accounting Controls

The County will develop and manage its accounting system to provide reasonable assurance regarding: (1) the safeguarding of assets against loss from unauthorized use or disposition; and (2) the reliability of financial records for preparing financial statements and maintaining accountability for assets. "Reasonable assurance" recognizes that: (1) the cost of a control should not exceed the benefits likely to be derived; and (2) the evaluation of costs and benefits requires estimates and judgments by management.

Audits

The County will ensure the conduct of timely, effective, and periodic audit coverage of all financial records and actions of the County, its officials, and employees in compliance with local, State, and Federal law.

POLICIES FOR EXPENDITURES AND ALLOCATION OF COSTS

Content of Budgets

The County will include in the Operating Budget all programs and facilities which are not included in the Capital Improvements Program. There are three major impacts of the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) on Operating Budgets: debt service, current revenues applied to the CIP for debt avoidance or for projects which are not debt-eligible; and presumed costs of operating newly opened facilities. Please refer to the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) section in this document for more detail.

Expenditure Growth

The Charter (Section 305) requires that the County Council annually adopt and review spending affordability guidelines for the Operating Budget, including guidelines for the aggregate Operating Budget. The aggregate Operating Budget excludes Operating Budgets for: Enterprise funds; grants; tuition and tuition-related charges of Montgomery College; and the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission. County law implementing the Charter requires that the Council set expenditure limits for each agency, as well as for the total, in order to provide more effective guidance to the agencies in the preparation of their budget requests.

Spending affordability guidelines for the Capital Budget and Capital Improvements Program are adopted in odd-numbered calendar years. They have been interpreted in subsequent County law to be limits on the amount of general obligation debt and Park and Planning debt that may be approved for expenditure for the first and second years of the CIP and for the entire six years of the CIP.

Any aggregate budget that exceeds the guidelines then in effect requires the affirmative vote of seven councilmembers for approval.

The Executive advises the Council on prudent spending affordability limits and makes budget recommendations for all agencies consistent with realistic prospects for the community's ability to pay, both in the upcoming fiscal year and in the ensuing years.

Consistent with the Charter (Section 302) requirement for a six-year Public Services Program, the Executive continues to improve long-range displays for operating programs.

Allocation of Costs

The County will balance the financial burden of programs and facilities as fairly as possible between the general taxpayers and those who benefit directly, recognizing the common good that flows from many public expenditures, the inability of some citizens to pay the full costs of certain benefits, and the difficulty of measuring the relationship between public costs and public or private benefits of some services.

Tax Duplication Avoidance

In accordance with law, the County will reimburse those municipalities and special taxing districts which provide public services that would otherwise be provided by the County from property taxes.

Expenditure Reduction

The County will seek expenditure reductions whenever possible through efficiencies, reorganization of services, and through the reduction or elimination of programs, policies, and practices which have outlived their usefulness. The County will seek inter-agency opportunities to improve productivity.

Shared Provision of Service

The County will encourage, through matching grants, subsidies, and other funding assistance, the participation of private organizations in the provision of desirable public services when public objectives can be more effectively met through private activity and expertise and where permitted by law.

Public Investment in Infrastructure

The County will, within available funds, plan and budget for those facilities and that infrastructure necessary to support its economy and those public programs determined to be necessary for the quality of life desired by its citizens.

Cost Avoidance

The County will, within available funds, consider investment in equipment, land or facilities, and other expenditure actions, in the present, to reduce or avoid costs in the future.

Procurement

The County will make direct or indirect purchases through a competitive process, except when an alternative method of procurement is specifically authorized by law, is in the County's best interest, and is the most cost-effective means of procuring goods and services.

Use of Restricted Funds

In order to align costs with designated resources for specific programs or services, the County will, whenever possible, charge expenses against a restricted revenue source prior to using general funds.

DEBT MANAGEMENT POLICIES

Debt Management

The County will minimize debt service costs through the judicious use of available debt instruments, consistent with the desirability of maintaining stable current tax rates and distributing the costs of certain long-lived facilities among all users, present and future.

General Obligation Debt Incurred

The County will limit the amount of new general obligation debt it will plan for and issue in any six-year period to that which can be fully supported by its revenues under conservative fiscal and economic projections and which will reasonably assure retention of the County's highest credit rating (AAA) in national debt markets. Capital Improvements Program expenditures funded by County General Obligation bonds and Park and Planning bonds are subject to spending affordability limits set by the County Council.

Revenue Bonds

Debt may be incurred, as authorized by law, based on the pledge of particular revenues to its repayment, in contrast to general obligation debt, which pledges general tax revenues. Revenue-based debt carries a higher interest rate but allows a direct relationship between the cost of a project and the users who benefit from it.

Lease Revenue Bonds

Debt or other financing instruments may be issued on behalf of the County by other governmental entities such as the Revenue Authority or a State agency. This debt or other instrument is generally supported by lease payments. Although these lease payments are subject to annual appropriation, they constitute a long-term obligation of the County that is similar to debt service payments. These types of lease payments have a direct impact on debt capacity, in that they should be considered comparable to debt service when comparing long-term obligations to total expenditures.

Bond Anticipation Notes (BANs)

The County will use short-term, interim financing techniques, such as variable rate notes and commercial paper for the Capital Budget. Short-term financing is converted annually to long-term debt, thereby preserving the short-term status of these borrowing programs. This technique preserves working capital for use in funding the Operating Budget. It also provides flexibility with regard to the timing and the funding of capital expenditures.

Current Revenue Funding

The County will make use of available current revenues for pay-as-you-go funding of the CIP as a means of reducing the costs of debt service. When revenue levels permit, priority will be given to inclusion within annual budgets of additional cash payments for infrastructure over the amount of current revenues specifically designated to non-debt eligible capital projects. This is commonly referred to as "PAYGO" (pay-as-you-go) financing.

Tax-Exempt Financing - Private Use

The County will support the private use of tax-exempt financing through Economic Development Revenue bonds, or such other instruments as are authorized by law, only when such financing: serves public objectives; has economic, fiscal, and social benefits for the County; and does not pledge either the full faith and credit or the taxing power of the County or its political subdivisions.

GOVERNMENTAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES

Productivity

The County will seek continuous improvement in the productivity of County programs in terms of quantity of services relative to resources expended, through all possible strategies.

Employee Involvement

The County will actively encourage and make use of the experience and expertise of its workforce for optimum program effectiveness and cost-efficiency of public service delivery through training, teamwork, employee empowerment, and other precepts of quality management.

Intergovernmental Program Efforts

The County will seek program efficiencies and cost savings through cooperative agreements and joint program efforts with other County agencies, municipalities, regional organizations, and the State and Federal governments.

Alternative Service Delivery

The County will consider obtaining public service delivery through private or nonprofit sectors via contract or service agreement, rather than through governmental programs and employees, when permitted by law, cost-effective, and consistent with other public objectives and policies.

Risk Management

The County will: control its exposure to financial loss through a combination of commercial and self-insurance; self-insure against all but highest cost risks; and aggressively control its future exposure through a risk management program that allocates premium shares among agencies based on loss history.

Employee Compensation

The County will seek to provide total compensation (pay plus employee benefits) that is: comparable to jobs in the private sector; comparable among similar jobs in the several County departments and agencies; and comparable between employees in collective bargaining units and those outside such units.

The government will act to contain the growth of compensation costs through organizational efficiencies within its departments and agencies, management efficiencies within its operations and service delivery, and productivity improvements within its workforce.

Pension Funds

The County will, to assure the security of benefits for current and future retirees and the solvency of the Employee Retirement System of Montgomery County, provide for the judicious management and investment of the fund's assets through the Board of Investment Trustees (BIT), and strive to increase the funding ratio of assets to accrued liability. The BIT also selects the service providers and investment options available for employees participating in the Retirement Savings Plan and the Deferred Compensation Plan.

Surplus Property

The County will maximize the residual value of land parcels or buildings declared excess to current public needs through public reuse, lease to appropriate private organizations, or sale, in order to return them to the tax base of the County. Disposition of goods which have become obsolete, unusable, or surplus to the needs of the County will be accomplished through bid, auction, or other lawful method, to the purchaser offering the highest price except under circumstances as specified by law.

Fiscal Impact Reviews

The County will review proposed local and State legislation for specific findings and recommendations relative to financial and budgetary impacts and any continuing and potential long-term effects on the operations of government.

Economic Impact Statements

Where applicable, the County will review proposed local and State legislation for specific findings and recommendations relative to economic impacts for any continuing and potential long-term effects on the economic well-being of the County.

Resource Management

The County will seek continued improvement in its budgetary and financial management capacity in order to reach the best possible decisions on resource allocation and the most effective use of budgeted resources.

POLICIES FOR REVENUES AND PROGRAM FUNDING

Diversification of Revenues

The County will establish the broadest possible base of revenues and seek alternative revenues to fund its programs and services, in order to:

- Decrease reliance on general taxation for discretionary but desirable programs and services and rely more on user fees and charges;
- Decrease the vulnerability of programs and services to reductions in tax revenues as a result of economic fluctuations; and
- Increase the level of self-support for new program initiatives and enhancements.

Revenue Projections

The County will estimate revenues in a realistic and conservative manner in order to minimize the risk of a funding shortfall.

Property Tax

The County will, to the fullest extent possible, establish property tax rates in such a way as to:

- Limit annual levies so that tax revenues are held at or below the rate of inflation, or justify exceeding those levels if extraordinary circumstances require higher rates;
- Avoid wide annual fluctuations in property tax revenue as economic and fiscal conditions change; and
- Fully and equitably obtain revenues from new construction and changes in land or property use.

A 1990 amendment to the County Charter (Section 305), "Question F," limits the annual increase in real property tax revenue to the rate of inflation plus that associated with new construction, rezoning, changes in property use, and development districts. This limit may be overridden by a vote of seven of the nine councilmembers.

County Income Tax

The County will maintain the rate for the local personal income tax within the limits specified in the Maryland Code, Tax-General Article, Section 10-106.

Special Districts

The County has established special districts within which extra services, not performed Countywide, are provided and funded from revenues generated within those districts. Examples are the Urban, Recreation, and Parking Lot Districts. The County will also abolish special districts when the conditions which led to their creation have changed.

Most special districts have a property tax to pay all or part of the district expenses. Such property taxes are included in the overall limit set on annual real property tax revenue increases by Section 305 of the County Charter.

Special Funds

The revenues and expenditures of special districts are accounted for in special revenue funds or, in the case of Parking Lot Districts, in enterprise funds. As a general principle, these special funds pay an overhead charge to the General Fund to cover the management and support services provided by General Fund departments to these special fund programs.

When the fund balances of special funds grow to exceed mandated or otherwise appropriate levels relative to district public purposes, the County may consider transferring part of the fund balance to support other programs, as allowed by law. For example, portions of the fee and fine revenue of the Parking Lot Districts (PLDs) are transferred to the Mass Transit Fund and a portion of the PLDs' fee revenue is transferred to the Urban Districts.

Enterprise Funds

The County will, through pricing, inventory control, and other management practices, ensure appropriate fund balances for its enterprise funds while obtaining full cost-recovery for direct and indirect government support, as well as optimal levels of revenue transfer for General Fund purposes.

One-Time or "Windfall" Revenues

Except for excess revenues which must go to the Revenue Stabilization Fund (see below), the County will, whenever possible, give highest priority for the use of one-time revenues from any source to the funding of capital assets or other nonrecurring expenditures so as not to incur ongoing expenditure obligations for which revenues may not be adequate in future years.

Intergovernmental Revenues

The County will aggressively seek a fair share of available State and Federal financial support unless conditions attached to that assistance are contrary to the County's interest. Where possible, Federal or State funding for the full cost of the program will be requested, including any indirect costs of administering a grant-funded program. For reasons of fiscal prudence, the County may choose not to solicit grants that will require an undeclared fiscal commitment beyond the term of the grant.

User Fees and Charges

The County will charge users directly for certain services and use of facilities where there is immediate and direct benefit to those users, as well as a high element of personal choice or individual discretion involved, rather than fund them through general taxation. Such charges include licenses, permits, user fees, charges for services, rents, tuition, and sales of goods. This policy will also be applied to fines and forfeitures. See also: "Policies for User Fees and Charges," later in this Fiscal Policy section.

Cash Management and Investments

The objective of the County's cash management and investment program is to achieve maximum financial return on available funds while assuring a high level of safety. Cash will be pooled and invested on a daily basis reflecting the investment objective priorities of capital preservation, liquidity, and yield.

Reserves and Revenue Stabilization

The County will maintain total reserves for tax supported funds that include both an operating margin reserve and the Revenue Stabilization Fund (or "rainy day fund"). For tax supported funds, the budgeted total reserve of the operating margin and the Revenue Stabilization Fund should be at least 6.0 percent of total resources (i.e., revenues, transfers, prior year undesignated and designated fund balance).

An operating margin reserve (or unappropriated fund balance) will be budgeted for tax supported funds in order to provide sufficient funds for unanticipated revenue shortfalls or unexpected expenditure requirements.

The County's Revenue Stabilization Fund was established to accumulate funds during periods of strong economic growth in order to provide budgetary flexibility during times of funding shortfalls. Fifty percent of selected revenues in excess of budgeted amounts must be transferred to the Fund; discretionary contributions may also be made. Unless decided otherwise by six or more councilmembers, withdrawals may be made only under certain economic conditions and may be used only to support appropriations which have become unfunded.

The budgeted reserve levels for non-tax supported funds are established by each government agency and vary based on the particular fiscal requirements and business functions of the fund as well as any relevant laws, policies, or bond covenants.

POLICIES FOR USER FEES AND CHARGES

To control the growth of property taxation as the County's principal revenue source, there is a need to closely allocate certain costs to those who most use or directly benefit from specific government programs and services. Fees and charges are those amounts received from consumers of government services or users of facilities on the basis of personal consumption or private benefit rather than individual income, wealth, or property values. Significant government revenues are and should be obtained from licenses, permits, user fees, charges for services, transit fares, rents, tuition, sales, and fines. The terms "fee" and "charge" are used here interchangeably to include each of these types of charges.

Purpose of User Fee Policy

Access to programs and services. The imposition of and level of fees and charges should be set generally to ensure economic and physical access by all residents to all programs and services provided by the government. Exceptions to this basic public policy are: the pricing of public goods (such as parking facilities) in order to attain other public policy objectives (such as public use and support of mass transit); and using a charge to enforce compliance with laws and regulations, such as fines for parking violations.

Fairness. User fees and charges are based on the idea of equity in the distribution of costs for government programs and services, with the objective of sharing those costs with the individual user when there is individual choice in the kind or amount of use, and of adjusting charges in accordance with individual ability to pay when there is no choice.

Diversification of revenue sources. User fees and charges enhance the government's ability to equitably provide programs and services which serve specific individuals and groups and for which there is no other alternative provider available. The policy objective is to decrease reliance on general revenues for those programs and services which produce direct private benefits and to fund such programs and services through revenues directly related to their costs and individual consumption.

Goals

Goals for the imposition of user fees and charges include:

- Recovery of all, or part of, government costs for the provision of certain programs and services to the extent that they directly benefit private individuals or constituencies rather than the public at large;
- Most efficient allocation of available public resources to those programs meeting the broadest public need or demand;
- More effective planning and alternative choices for future programs, services, and facilities through "market" information from actual user demand;
- Improved cost-effectiveness and accountability for the spending of public funds by allowing individual citizens to choose their level of use from among those programs, services, and facilities where individual choice may be exercised; and
- Ensuring dedicated sources of funds to cover the costs of programs and services of direct benefit to designated special areas or user groups rather than the County as a whole.

Criteria

Within these goals, government officials must consider a variety of factors in deciding whether to employ fees and charges and what rates to charge. Each proposal for a new or increased fee is evaluated according to these criteria.

Public benefit. Many programs benefit the public as a whole as well as those who directly use the service. By definition, all programs offered by government have some public benefit or they should not be undertaken. However, the rate set must balance the private benefit with the public good so that there is maximum overall benefit to the community, and the costs are fairly allocated.

This balance may be achieved either by specifying a percentage of cost recovery (from users) or by a tax subsidy for each service (from the general public). The greater the public benefit, the lower the percentage of cost recovery that is appropriate. On one end of the scale, public utilities such as water and sewer should be paid for almost entirely on the basis of individual consumption, with full cost recovery from consumer-users; on the other, public education and public safety (police and fire service) are required for the overall public good and so are almost entirely supported through general taxation.

In between are services such as public health inspections or clinic services which protect the public at large but which are provided to specific businesses or individuals; facilities such as parks which are available to and used by everyone; and playing fields, golf courses, or tennis courts which serve only special recreational interests. Services that have private benefit for only a limited number of persons (such as public housing, rent or fuel subsidies) should not be "free" unless they meet very stringent tests of public good, or some related criteria such as essential human needs.

Ability to pay. Meeting essential human needs is considered a basic function of government, and for this reason programs or services assisting the very poor are considered a "public good" even though the benefit may be entirely to individuals. Whether to assess fees and how much to charge, depends on the ability to pay by those who need and make use of programs and services provided by government.

Without adjustment, fees are "regressive" because rates do not relate to wealth or income. For this reason, services intended mainly for low-income persons may charge less than otherwise would be the case. Policies related to fee scales or waivers should be consistent within similar services or as applied to similar categories of users. Implementation of fee waivers or reductions requires a means for establishing eligibility that is fair and consistent among programs. The eligibility method also must preserve the privacy and dignity of the individual.

User discretion. Fees and charges are particularly appropriate if the user has a choice about whether or not to use a particular program or service. Individuals have choices as to: forming a business that requires a license; use of particular recreational facilities; obtaining post-secondary education; or in transportation and related facilities. When fines represent a penalty to enforce public law or regulation, citizens can avoid the charge by compliance; fines should be set at a point sufficient to deter non-compliant behavior. The rates for fines and licenses may exceed the government cost of providing the related "service" when either deterrence or rationing the special "benefit" is desired as a matter of public policy.

Market demand. Services which are fee-supported often compete for customer demand with similar services offered by private firms or by other public jurisdictions. Fees for publicly-provided goods cannot be raised above a competitive level without loss of patronage and potential reduction in cost-effectiveness. Transit fares, as a user charge, will compete with the individual's real or perceived cost of alternative choices such as the use of a private automobile. In certain cases, it may be advisable to accept a loss of volume if net revenue increases, while in others it may be desirable to set the fee to encourage use of some other public alternative.

Specialized demand. Programs with a narrow or specialized demand are particularly suitable for fees. The fee level or scale may be set to control the expansion of services or programs in which most of the public does not need or elect to participate. Services that have limitations on their availability may use fee structures as a means of rationing available capacity or distributing use over specific time periods. Examples include golf courses, parking, and transit fares, all of which have differentiated levels related to time of use. Even programs or services which benefit all or most residents may appropriately charge fees if their benefits are measurable but unequal among individuals. Charges based on consumption, such as water and sewer provision, are examples. In addition, because they do not pay taxes, nonresidents may be charged higher rates than residents (as with community college tuition), or they may be charged a fee even if a program is entirely tax supported for County residents.

Legal constraints. State law may require, prohibit, regulate, or preempt certain existing or proposed user charges. In general, local government has no authority to tax unless specifically authorized by State law. Localities are generally able to charge for services if those charges are authorized by local ordinance and not prohibited, regulated, or preempted by State law. If a proposed fee is legally construed as a tax, then the fee may be invalidated until authorized as a tax by the State. Federal or State law may also prohibit or limit the use of charges for certain grant programs, and other Federal or State assistance may require the local authority to "match" certain amounts through imposition of charges. It should be noted that law on such issues is frequently in dispute; particular fees, or the level of charge, may be subject to legal challenge.

Program cost. The cost of a program or service is an important factor in setting user charges. Costs may include not only the direct personnel and other costs of operating a program, but also indirect costs such as overhead for government support services. In addition, a fee may be set to recover all or part of facilities construction or debt service costs attributable to a program. Recovery of any part of the costs of programs benefiting specific individuals should identify and consider the full cost of such programs or services to acknowledge the cost share which will be borne by the public at large.

Reimbursement. A decision on whether to use fees is influenced by the possibility of reimbursement or shifting of real costs that can lower the net cost to the resident. For example, some County taxes are partially deductible from Federal or State income tax, while fees and charges may not be deducted. Hence, the same revenue to the County may cost less to the resident if it is a tax rather than a fee. Charges may also be reimbursed to (shifted from) the paying individual from (or to) other sources, either governmental or private. For example, ambulance transport charges may be payable under health insurance. In general, the County will use fees to minimize the real cost to residents, within the context of equity and other criteria noted.

Administrative cost. The government incurs administrative costs to measure, bill, and collect fee revenues. In general, it is less expensive to collect tax revenue. If a potential user fee revenue will cost more to collect than it will produce, it may not be appropriate to assess a fee even if otherwise desirable and appropriate. It is important to develop ways to measure the use of services which do not cost more than the usefulness or fairness of doing the measurement. For example, "front footage" is used as a measurement basis for assessing certain charges related to road improvements and supply of water and sewer, to avoid the administrative cost of precisely measuring benefit. Similarly, the cost of effective collection enforcement must be weighed against total benefits of the charge, including the value of deterrence if the charge is punitive.

Preserving the real value of the charge. During the period when a fee has been in effect, costs have usually risen and inflation has cut the real value of revenue produced by the fee. In many instances, adjustments to user charges have either not been imposed or have lagged behind inflation. The rate of the charge should be increased regularly to restore the former value of the revenue involved. Most fees and charges should be indexed so that their per unit revenues will keep up with inflation.

FRAMEWORK FOR FISCAL POLICY

Legal Framework

Fiscal policy is developed and amended, as necessary, according to:

- Federal law and regulation;
- Maryland law and regulation;
- Montgomery County Charter; and
- Montgomery County law and regulation.

Fiscal Planning Projections and Assumptions

Various trends and economic indicators are projected and analyzed for their impacts on County programs and services and for their impact on fiscal policy as applied to annual Operating Budgets. Among these are:

- Inflation, as measured by change in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for the Washington-Baltimore area, is an important indicator of future costs of government goods and services, including anticipated wage and salary adjustments. The CPI change also specifies the increase in property tax revenue allowed by Section 305 of the Charter (1990 "Question F" Amendments) without an extraordinary vote of the Council.
- Growth of population and jobs, which are principal indicators of requirements for new or expanded programs and services.
- Demographic change in the numbers or location within the County of specific age groups or other special groups, which provides an indication of the requirements and costs of various government services and programs.
- The assessable property tax base of the County which is the principal indicator of anticipated property tax collections, a major source of general revenues.
- Personal income earned by County residents, which is a principal basis for projecting income tax revenues as one of the County's major revenue sources, as well as being a basis for determining income eligibility status for certain government programs.
- Employment growth and unemployment rates within the County, as indicators of personal income growth as a revenue source, as well as being indicators of various service or program needs, such as day care or public welfare assistance.

Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP)

The application of fiscal policy in the financial management of annual operating expenditures must be in conformity with GAAP standards. This involves the separate identification of, and accounting for, the various operating funds; adherence to required procedures such as transfers between funds and agencies; and regular audits of general County operations and special financial transactions such as the disbursement of Federal grants.

Credit Markets and Credit Reviews

The County's ability to borrow cost-effectively depends upon its credit standing as assessed by the three major credit rating agencies: Moody's Investors Service, Inc., Standard and Poor's, and Fitch. While key aspects of maintaining the highest credit rating are related to the management of the County's Capital Improvements Program (CIP), others are directly applicable to the annual Operating Budgets:

- Maintenance of positive fund balances (reserves) to ensure continued County liquidity for debt repayment; and
- Assurances through County law and practice of an absolute commitment to timely repayment of debt and other obligations.

Intergovernmental Agreements

Fiscal policy for operating budgets must provide guidance for, and be applied within, the context of agreements made between the County and other jurisdictions or levels of government relative to program or service provision. Examples include agreements with:

- Incorporated municipalities or special tax districts for reimbursement of the costs of various services provided by those units for their residents which would otherwise have to be expended by the County;
- State agencies for shared costs of various social service programs and for participation in various grant and loan programs;
- Federal agencies to obtain support to meet mutual program objectives through programs such as the Community Development Block Grant; and
- Prince George's County on the annual approval of the budgets of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.